

# GATHERED FRAGMENTS

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## Celebrating 150 Years of Mercy: Mercy Hospital's Commitment to the Community, 1847-1997

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Upon arriving in Pittsburgh in 1843, the seven Irish Sisters of Mercy followed their mission of providing care to the sick, initially through visitation of the sick poor. In 1847, the Sisters fulfilled their vision of providing hospital care through the establishment of The Mercy Hospital of Pittsburgh, the first hospital in western Pennsylvania. Mercy Hospital, today a part of the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System, has a 150-year history of caring for the community, through epidemics, wars, floods, and economic downturns. Mercy Hospital has maintained its physical location, extending its patient care services to more sites through the development of the System.

During the early years, the Sisters faced many epidemics — typhus, smallpox, and cholera. During the typhus epidemic of 1848, the Sisters saved 15 out of 19 patients while the entire Sister nursing staff, all of whom were under the age of 30, died. Their deaths resulted in increasing the community's respect and trust, furthering the work of the Sisters. During epidemics of smallpox and cholera, the Sisters cared for the ostracized epidemic patients. In 1918, Mercy Hospital cooperated with the U.S. Army by accepting 302 victims of the Spanish influenza.

During the various wars, Mercy Hospital provided medical support through the education of doctors and nurses who would serve in the armed forces. The Hospital had a history of providing medical education, dating back to its first intern, Dr. Thomas Shaw, in 1848. Nursing education, however, was not formalized at the Hospital until 1893, with the establishment of the School of Nursing. Until that time, the Sisters of Mercy trained themselves and they provided Hospital and wartime nursing. Mercy Hospital's participation was most notable in the Civil War, World War I, and World War II.

In 1862, during the Civil War, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton personally sought out the hospital and nursing expertise of the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy, asking them to take over Stanton Military Hospital in Washington. Dealing with many supply shortages, the Sisters remained focused on caring for the soldiers. With the food supplies stretched to the limits, Sister Otillia, who was in charge of special diets, and another Sister set out in a carriage and returned with plenty of chickens and eggs. Nine days later a message was sent signed by President Abraham Lincoln: "To whom it may concern: on application of the Sisters of Mercy in charge of the military hospital in Washington, furnish such provisions as they desire to purchase and charge same to the War Department."

In World War I, Mercy Hospital medical and nursing personnel were assigned to Army Base No. 27 in Angers. In World War II, Mercy Hospital became one of the first hospitals in western Pennsylvania to be approved for U.S. Cadet Nurses Corps training. Mercy also abbreviated its intern program in order to make more doctors available for the armed forces. The 27th General Hospital was reorganized in World War II, serving as a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital unit in New Guinea, Australia, the Philippines and New Zealand. Mercy Hospital took these staffing shortages in stride.

Mercy Hospital has answered the call to aid the community in times of natural disasters, such as the Johnstown Flood and the St. Patrick's Day Flood. During the Johnstown Flood of 1889, Dr. Joseph Dickson organized a large group of doctors and nurses into immediate action. Upon his return to the hospital with the first set of patients, Dr. Dickson surprised Sister Marguerite Goldbach by pulling a newborn baby out of his huge ulster pocket while the mother lay on a mattress. Altogether, 51 flood victims were brought to Mercy, where they received free care. During the St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936,



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the Hospital continued to provide quality health care while overcoming the obstacle of no electricity. Emergency care was given by the light of a small generator, 700 trays of food were distributed throughout the hospital through a human chain, and a woman gave birth to twins by flashlight.

During the Panic of 1873 and the Great Depression, Mercy Hospital struggled to maintain its commitment to the community. In 1873, The Sisters greatly reduced their own meals to almost nothing in order to help feed the patients. Through these sacrifices and patron donations, the Hospital continued to exist through these hard days, continuing to provide care to the sick poor. Once again during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Sisters managed to contribute free care to the community — in 1931, the hospital donated more than \$600,000 worth of health care services, when one day in the hospital cost under \$4.00.

In the 1960s, Mercy Hospital refused to bend to the pressures of Allegheny County's Hospital Planning Association to relocate to the suburbs where it would not be able to provide care to the poor. By the 1970s, Mercy started taking its health care to other sections of the community, through Primary Care stations and a Caremobile. In 1983, the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System was established to further expand the Sisters care for the community. Today, the System's focus on patient care includes the long-term care at St. Pius X Residence and St. Joseph Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, a community hospital with Mercy Providence Hospital, primary care centers, home health services, and mental health/mental retardation and drug and alcohol services. The System also continues its dedication to providing education to physicians, nurses, and allied health professionals.

In the first half of this year, Mercy Hospital has celebrated its 150 years through a fundraising dinner, the money from which will go to the Hospital's Care for the Poor program. In the second half of this year, the Hospital will unveil an historical exhibit. Some of the other activities of the sesquicentennial include a get-well card contest for school children, a quilt show, volunteer projects to help the community, participation in several parades, and the establishment of a walk with commemorative plates. The Sisters of Mercy, Mercy Hospital, and the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System continue to provide quality health care to the community — a 150-year commitment.

## **FROM THE PRESIDENT**

### **Oct. 12 Meeting at St. John the Baptist (Byzantine) Cathedral, Munhall**

The Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania fall meeting will be a tour of St. John the Baptist (Byzantine) Cathedral at 210 Greentree Road, Munhall. Please plan to arrive at St. John's at 2 p.m. Sunday, October 12. Father Robert Karl, the pastor, will conduct a tour of this recently constructed classical Byzantine Church and explain the art and architecture. Please pass the word to any other individuals or groups who might be interested. Refreshments will be served following the tour.

St. John the Baptist is the cathedral of the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Pittsburgh. The archdiocese includes Catholics of the Byzantine Ruthenian Rite. It was established as an eparchy February 25, 1924, and made an archeparchy February 21, 1969. (The eparchy is the Eastern equivalent of the Western diocese.) The Most Rev. Judson Procyk, D.D., is the third metropolitan of the archeparchy. He was rector of the cathedral when the new building was raised. St. John the Baptist was consecrated June 12, 1994.

St. John's is a magnificent new building incorporating the traditional features of Byzantine church architecture. Many of these features can be traced back to the sixth century and earlier. A distinctive feature of Byzantine art is the icon. Seventy-two icons are found within the cathedral. They are the work of Michael Kapeluck, who worked closely with the architect, Grant Scott.

The new building incorporates the bells and stained-glass windows from the previous church. In every respect the old is made new in St. John the Baptist Cathedral. It is a splendid exemplar of living tradition.

Directions: Parkway East; Squirrel Hill/Homestead Exit. Follow the arrow for Homestead. Go over the Homestead high level bridge, straight up the hill past the old hospital. At the T, make a right turn onto



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